

## Small Company, Big Contribution

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When one thinks of agriculture, one generally thinks of land and crops. However, one should also consider the tools that help to plant and harvest the crops. Many towns in Illinois, big and small, had businesses that produced these tools. Belleville was one such town surrounded by some of Illinois' fertile soil.

In 1848, two strangers walked into the blossoming town of Belleville, Illinois. This was the first event in a chain that led to the birth of an influential agricultural machinery manufacturing company. The existence of the company eventually spanned over ninety years and grew in name and size over time. The company became known as the Harrison Machine Works.

The two strangers' names were John Cox and Cyrus Roberts. They rented a small shop in Belleville and began to build vibrating threshing machines. These machines were used to separate the head, or grain, of wheat from the stem, or straw. They added some improvements of their own to the machine. On October 28, 1851, the two men received a patent for these improvements. Their machines, using the patented inventions, could function constantly. This was an enormous difference when compared to the earlier models that needed to be regularly stopped and cleaned. On April 16, 1861, Roberts obtained another patent for further improvements. These two patents added greatly to the development of the vibrating threshing machine.

Around 1855, it is believed that Theophilus Harrison, William C. Buchanan, and Frank Middlecoff purchased the company from Cox and Roberts. It is unknown who exactly was involved in the sale due to the fact that early threshing machine company history often lacks reliable sources. However, from this point on until 1878, it is known that Theophilus Harrison and William C. Buchanan were the primary operators of Harrison and Company, as the company was called. It is also known that in 1874, Hugh Harrison and Cyrus Thompson both joined the business. It was at this time that the name was changed to the Harrison Machine Works.

Four years after Harrison and Thompson joined the company, on November 12, it was incorporated. The four stockholders were Theophilus Harrison, William C. Buchanan, Cyrus Thompson and Hugh W. Harrison. Each held 750 shares of stock valued at \$75,000 each. On November 26, 1878 in Belleville, Illinois, the first official meeting was held. The report of that meeting was filed with the Illinois Secretary of State on November 29, 1878. As a result, the secretary of state certified that the Harrison Machine Works was a legally organized corporation. It was at this time that Hugh Harrison and Cyrus Thompson became major leaders in the company, and stayed as such until 1927.

During the time of incorporation, the country was emerging from the economic depression of 1873. The economy improved in the early 1880s, but then dipped again by 1885. A panic occurred in 1893, but it was followed by a great upswing referred to as a period of corporate prosperity. It lasted from about 1900 to 1906.

Throughout its history, Harrison Machine Works experienced several setbacks and successes. In 1872, a fire caused \$5,000 in damage to the foundry, which was a severe loss. In spite of the loss, in this same year the company bought additional space and spent \$40,000 to

install electrical wiring and add a new boiler. The need for this extra space and the other improvements was required for the company to construct steam traction engines. By April 1874 the first engine had been completed. This was not only the first for the company, but actually the first ever produced in Belleville. On March 28 of that same year, the company showed the new engine in a Belleville parade. Behind it marched the 200 workers of the company.

In 1885, disaster struck again. Nearby Richland Creek flooded and caused hundreds of dollars in damage to a newly constructed warehouse and the machines stored inside. However, later this year the company received good news. In September, the Harrison rice thresher won the Gold Medal at the New Orleans Exposition. This was an important step to agricultural companies, because these awards could be used to prove how good were their wares. Five years later, in 1890, a second fire destroyed several sheds. Between 1890 and 1914, the company experienced good and bad economic times. The farm machine companies were dependent on the needs of the farmers. During World War I, there was a great need for American farm products. Because of this there was an increased demand for farm machinery. Harrison Machine Works, along with other companies, flourished. After the war ended, the farm industry faced a recession that could force entire companies to close.

However, eight years later, the Harrison Machine Works faced the greatest threat to its existence. It was accidentally discovered that an out-of-state association was planning to buy out the company and move it. Already one-third of the company's stocks had been purchased. The president of the company urged the sale of the remaining \$200,000 worth of stock so that it could stay where it was. The entire scenario was thought, by Cyrus Thompson, to be caused by the lack of interest among the shareholders who lived far away, on the Pacific Coast. These people had little interest in the company. While this was in fact a great danger to the Harrison Machine Works, the move out of Belleville was averted.

In spite of its many improvements and awards, by 1926, the decline of the agricultural economy took its toll on the company's profits. There was word that the company might be sold. St. John's Hospital, Sisters of St. Francis, and St. Elizabeth's Hospital of Belleville, which was located near the company, all joined together and offered \$150,000 to purchase the land on which the Harrison Machine Works was located. The company's officers, Cyrus Thompson, William A. Thompson, Lee Harrison Jr., and Nic Herzler, agreed. While many speculated that this deal was made because of financial distress within the company, the newspapers assured otherwise. The stockholders met and filed a certificate of dissolution that split up the remaining funds in relation to the stocks they owned. However, the dollar numbers do suggest that there were some financial problems. While in the beginning of the business's life, the stocks had been valued at a collective \$300,000, by 1926, these same shares were only worth \$135,000.

In September, 1927, the Harrison Machine Works purchased four acres of property on East Main Street. It constructed a new factory that opened the next year. However, this time it had to deal with the growing popularity of the gasoline tractor engine and the grain combine. These two inventions threatened the company severely and most likely led to the decline in sales. The Great Depression added to its problems, and eventually led to its end.

The history of Harrison Machine Works is long and varied. From fires to parades, it had seen the best and worst of times. It may not have been the largest farming company, but it struggled through hard times and still it managed to succeed. It remains one of the most commonly referenced nineteenth and early twentieth century agricultural machinery companies today. [From Joe Park and Joe Graziana, "Harrison Machine Works", *Engineers and Engines*, Mar. 1988.]